

Scranton Times-Tribune (1-28) In Dimock, EPA testing draws mixed reaction By LAURA LEGERE

DIMOCK TWP. - Two teams of scientists sampling well water from four homes a day are producing a picture of the aquifer under this Susquehanna County town that will help define the impact of natural gas drilling on drinking water.

The water captured in vials and packed in coolers by scientists and contractors for the Environmental Protection Agency since Jan. 23 is the heart of an investigation spurred by concerns that Cabot Oil & Gas Corp.'s Marcellus Shale drilling and hydraulic fracturing tainted water wells.

In a divided village where gas drilling is as earnestly embraced as it is criticized, the controversy over the EPA's fieldwork started before the sampling did. Test results are at least five weeks away.

The study has provoked strong criticism from the industry and its local supporters who accuse the EPA of meddling in what they consider a settled matter or a spectacle conjured by lawyers.

At the same time, the study has earned the grateful support of families, many of whom are suing Cabot, who have used their water warily or not at all since methane tied to drilling first intruded in 2008.

State officials determined faulty Cabot gas wells allowed methane to seep into 18 Dimock water supplies in 2009, but Cabot water tests from last fall raised federal regulators' concern about the potential health threats posed by other contaminants in the water.

The contaminants - some of which are naturally occurring but all of which are associated with natural gas drilling, the EPA said - include arsenic, barium, the plasticizer commonly called DEHP, glycol compounds, manganese, phenol and sodium.

"If we see an immediate threat to public health, we will not hesitate to take steps under the law to protect Americans whose health may be at risk," EPA spokeswoman Terri White said.

Residents who support Cabot's operations sent a letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson this week calling for her to "rein in" the "rogue regional office" in Philadelphia that is leading the investigation based on what they said were "baseless claims" and "hyped-up allegations" of pollutants that occur naturally in the region.

The group, Enough is Enough, created a campaign called "Dimock Proud" with yard signs, a petition drive and a logo: "Where the water IS clean and the people are friendly."

The petition to Ms. Jackson was bundled with an earlier petition signed by more than 400 Susquehanna County residents and sent to the state to ask for Cabot to be able to resume drilling in a 9-square-mile section of Dimock - where EPA is now testing - that has been off limits to the driller since 2010. The moratorium has continued because the state has not determined that the company's wells have stopped leaking methane.

"The Philadelphia Regional Office's action in enabling this litigation threatens our livelihoods and is destroying our community reputation," the residents wrote to Ms. Jackson. "These actions are an assault on our property rights and basic freedoms."

Cabot CEO Dan Dinges cited President Barack Obama's support for domestic natural gas in his State of the Union address when he also wrote to Ms. Jackson this week. Her agency's actions in Dimock "appear to undercut the President's stated commitment to this important resource," Mr. Dinges wrote.

In another statement released this week, the company said it "is concerned that this recent action may be more of an attempt to advance a political agenda hostile to shale gas development rather than a principled effort to address environmental concerns in the area."

The industry group Energy in Depth posted historical state and federal data on its website showing some of the pollutants that triggered the EPA investigation - manganese and arsenic - occur in the geological formation that is used for groundwater in Dimock. It cited a 2006 U.S. Geological Survey study that found arsenic in 18 of 143 domestic water wells it sampled in Northeast Pennsylvania, although none of the samples taken in Susquehanna or Wyoming counties detected the compound.

The arsenic level that triggered the EPA to truck water to one home in Dimock was nearly four times the federal standard.

The EPA rebuffed Cabot's criticism this week, saying its actions "are guided entirely by science and the law."

"We are providing water to a handful of households because data developed by Cabot itself provides evidence that they are being exposed to hazardous substances at levels of health concern," the agency said. "We are conducting monitoring as a prudent step to investigate these concerns and develop a sound scientific basis for assessing the need for further action."

While the Mr. Obama's address made clear his support for domestic natural gas extraction, the agency added, "he also affirmed our commitment to 'developing this resource without putting the health and safety of our citizens at risk.'"

Despite some residents' skepticism of the EPA's actions, the agency has received permission from 55 of the 66 Dimock homes it approached to conduct sampling, spokesman Roy Seneca said Friday. The EPA has not received a final response from 11 of the 66 homes. Its initial goal was to take samples from about 61 homes.

"I'm thrilled the EPA is here," resident Victoria Switzer said Friday as five scientists wearing blue gloves huddled on a mound of melting snow in her backyard where her well water trickled from a spigot. If the test comes back clear, she said, "I'll be very relieved that our water is safe to use and we can go on living in our home."

The water sampling will also provide key data for the future, she said. "I'm considering it baseline testing for the next wave when Cabot roars back in here."

Contact the writer: llegere@timeshamrock.com

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